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ABSTRACT

A pilot project evaluated the learning experience of adults taking one of seven creative writing courses in Edinburgh, Scotland (five courses run by Edinburgh University's Centre for Continuing Education and two run by Lothian Region Community Education). Data were obtained from a survey completed by 45 students (of 87 students receiving questionnaires) and from semistructured interviews with 13 of the course participants. Twenty-six students reported having previously attended a creative writing course/workshop. Reasons for deciding to attend a creative writing course varied widely and included the following: learn skills and techniques, develop discipline, general interest, assess one's own writing ability, share work with others, and get encouragement. Seventeen respondents cited venue/time of class as their main reason for attending their particular course, and 20 respondents were simultaneously attending another writing group/workshop. When asked what aspect of the course they found most enjoyable, 23 respondents cited interaction with others, 8 each cited group discussion or feedback from tutor, 5 cited specific class exercises, and 2 cited learning theoretical material. It was recommended that institutions offering creative writing courses/workshops consider more versatile course formats and requirements. (Twenty-three references/suggested readings are listed. The survey questions and responses are included.) (MN)

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES: NO 4

CREATIVE WRITING:
TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

GRAHAM HARTILL

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OCTOBER 1994

**CREATIVE WRITING:
TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION**

GRAHAM HARTILL

FOREWORD

In this exploration of the possibility of evaluating creative writing courses, Graham Hartill addresses issues of key contemporary interest to adult educators. At a time when notions like evaluation and quality are on everybody's lips but few people are actually thinking about them in depth, Hartill makes a welcome contribution to the consideration of both the difficulty and the interest of evaluation. He avoids the temptation to indulge in measurement for its own sake and is firm in his conclusion that the key criterion for evaluating a creative writing group as successful must be the fact that the group works as a group, and that criteria such as publication and performance, a bit like exam league tables, are misleading at best. This poses a challenge for all of us who are concerned to develop methods of evaluation which do not destroy the courses they claim to serve. However along with that conclusion Hartill includes data from questionnaires and quotations from interviews which have a direct relevance to any course organiser or tutor, not least with respect to the value of running classes of both general and specific nature. For example, not all people aged 50+ want to join a group defined that way, but many do. Similarly not all women want to join a women's writing group, but again many do. What emerges from Hartill's study is the desirability of programming groups of different types which complement one another. Thus as well as its immediate aim of exploring creative writing groups themselves, Hartill's study has implications for the broader issue of programme balance, both within and between institutions.

Murdo Macdonald (on behalf of the Editorial Committee)

GRAHAM HARTILL

Graham Hartill is a writer and teacher now living back in South Wales after a two year period as Scottish Arts Council Writing Fellow and tutor in Creative Writing at The University of Edinburgh Centre for Continuing Education. In 1993 he was awarded a Welsh Arts Council Writer's Bursary and is currently working with schoolchildren in the Upper Afan Valley and with long-term prisoners at Usk. He is, with Larry Butler, co-founder of the Poetry in Healing Project, whose aim is to help establish writing as an expressive therapy.

CREATIVE WRITING: TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR EVALUATION

SUMMARY

This report describes a pilot project, through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, to evaluate the learning experience of adults taking creative writing courses. Seven courses were looked at within the city of Edinburgh: five run by the Centre for Continuing Education at the University, two by Lothian Region Community Education.

The paper acknowledges that creative writing, like other expressive subjects, is notoriously difficult to assess: the participants' experiences of their courses and their interpretations of and answers to queries about both their learning and their own writing tend to be very subjective and somewhat inconsistent; what is more, there are cultural assumptions about what writing is, who and what it is for and who can do it implicit in even the most seemingly elementary enquiry. Also, if, as many believe, "creative writing cannot be taught, it can only be learned", how does learning happen? And how can we move to improve the learning experience of course participants?

The results of both the questionnaire and interview procedures are reported and examined, the strengths and shortcomings of the research are analysed. The report concludes that the questionnaire served a useful purpose in revealing a good deal of interesting material about participants' motivations and experiences and in indicating changes in their concerns over time (most notably with regard to a general shift from preconceived individual goals to a greater emphasis on self-fulfilment and group participation). Only the interview procedure, however, is capable of responding flexibly to the subjective meanings of the individual's experience of the creative writing workshop.

Finally, stress is laid on the dynamics of the workshop itself as the most pertinent criterion for assessing the success or failure of any creative writing course for its participants. Suggestions are made for a more coherent structuring of provision in which assessment procedures (using a more refined and appropriate questionnaire in tandem with the semi-structured interview) can make a vital and integrated contribution.

This work was commissioned by Tom Schuller, Director of the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Edinburgh and funded by the Universities Funding Council. To Professor Schuller, Dr Murdo Macdonald, Lecturer and Dr Anne Marie Bostyn, Research Fellow at the Centre, I owe my thanks for their support and their valuable comments on the research and the writing as it progressed.

Graham Hartill

October 1994

INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt about the popularity of creative writing throughout Britain; thousands of people, of all ages and from all walks of life, spend some of their time writing – some with a view to publication and a level of commercial success, some with a specific personal project in mind such as an autobiography for purely family consumption, others as a means of self-development or just as a hobby. Thousands of writers attend courses, writing groups or day- or summer-schools in order to somehow get better at it. In the Autumn term of 1992 Edinburgh University Centre for Continuing Education was offering five distinct creative writing courses on a weekly basis along with several Saturday schools; other courses were available throughout the city offered by the local education authority's Community Education section, the Scottish Poetry Library and by the individual initiative of local writers, not to mention the continuing work being carried out by locally based writers-in-residence.

There is no reason to suspect that Edinburgh is in any way unique in the extent of this provision. Yet, as any creative writing tutor or anyone who has attended more than one course will know, any one course will almost certainly be quite different from any other, not only in the forms of its attention but in its methodology (or lack of it), the style of the tutor and in the general tenor of the experience it provides for the participant. Having been involved in the field myself for over 12 years, I have come to suspect that the marked absence, until quite recently, of attempts to evaluate this experience, rather than being an inevitable symptom of the personal and inspirational nature of creative work, may well reflect some deep cultural presumptions as to what writing actually is and what it means to be an 'author'. As a tutor I share the frustration felt by many, especially those beginning to work in the field, at the difficulty of getting useful feedback and of being able to share ideas and experiences. On the other hand I am also aware that the mystique surrounding creativity can all too easily be appropriated by the tutor – the view is widely held that what goes on between a 'real' writer and a student is more a matter of osmosis than technique and though there may actually be more than a grain of truth in this I don't think that it excuses defensiveness by either tutors or providers. A willingness to examine issues which may lead to a better service for both the tutors and the public is overdue, creating though it may one or two ripples on the surface of some of our broader cultural definitions.

It's a notoriously difficult subject to talk about anyway. My own recent experience of attending a development workshop on creative writing standards (NVQs and SVQs) held by the Arts and Entertainment Training Council was like a day-trip to Babel; what understanding there was between the 30 or so diverse writers present was based on the presumption that there was little if any common agreement on how a writer actually worked at all. The job of the Council to set measurable standards appears, on the surface at least, to be ludicrously bureaucratic – an apparatchik's nightmare of trying to pin down

and pickle one of the most elusively human activities. Yet the aims of our project are less problematic – **to run a pilot project as a move toward the development of a method of evaluating the creative writing course;** to pilot a questionnaire and, through subsequent analysis and interviews, to assess its usefulness, its strengths and weaknesses for ascertaining information on the following issues:

- i) Why do people attend creative writing courses?
- ii) What are their expectations and preconceptions with regard to such courses?
- iii) How does their experience of the course confirm or contradict these expectations?
- iv) How does their experience of the course affect them, both personally and as writers?
- v) What were the most enjoyable and beneficial aspects of their course?
- vi) Has their experience changed their attitude to their writing?
- vii) What do they do with regard to their writing after their course has finished?

It is a truth, however, of the modern age (and a slogan of the post-modern) that we cannot take even such seemingly straightforward queries as read: to make any sense of our responses it is necessary to keep some further, broader, questions always in our minds:

- i) What **is** writing?
- ii) What **is it for**?
- iii) **Who** is it for?
- iv) Can it be taught?
- v) What is **quality** in writing?
- vi) What does **creative** mean?
- vii) How can you assess personal satisfaction, personal growth?
- viii) What is **success**?
- ix) What can a group experience offer to such a supposedly individualistic activity?
and finally for now:
- x) Is it necessary to reconcile cultural distinctions between writing seen as fine art, media, journalism, communication, self-expression, therapy, history, reminiscence or play in order to make any sense of whatever information we may glean?

The literature that exists on the role of creative writing in adult and continuing education is thinly scattered. Several researchers have touched on different aspects of the subject without going into depth and a good deal of the writing seems keen only to point out the multiple benefits creative writing may have for the participant.

McAllister (1992) is concerned to establish the value of so-called 'leisure' courses in the light of proposed cuts in financial support; she cites Jarvis (1983) as demonstrating that creative writing is one of the 'top ten hobbies' practised by retirement and pre-retirement aged students and claims that proposals to make non-vocational courses self-financing would "exclude many groups of students who are particularly attracted to creative writing, especially pensioners, women at home, the long-term unemployed and young people who attend while looking for work." She cites Smith (1988) as demonstrating the personal and therapeutic value of adult education generally who in turn draws on Jones's concept of **meta-learning**, an idea that McAllister no doubt would find particularly apt as regards creative writing:

We know from our experience that we often become aware of feeling differently when we achieved some piece of learning. Quite apart from learning car maintenance for example, we feel differently about ourselves when we have mastered this... If it can be shown that as a result of having acquired this set of skills we now have more confidence, a more positive self concept and an increased motivation to seek further complex learning experiences, then we have done more than to learn to maintain a car: we have undergone personal change. (Jones 1982)

Smith goes on:

Jones seems to be claiming more for the role of the self-concept than an incidental by-product of learning. In fact, he is suggesting a central, reciprocal relationship between self-image changes and learning itself: 'To learn anything is to demonstrate that we are **capable** of learning... we see ourselves in a new way. Our self-concept changes to include this component.' Students come to see themselves as more competent, and this enhanced self-image, as Carl Rogers has long argued, will make more likely behaviour that is consistent with it... it will motivate further achievement.

McAllister took the unorthodox yet appropriate approach of asking participants, drawn from three daytime adult education classes in West London, to submit a piece of 'creative writing work' which illustrated what they thought about their courses. This was followed by a few taped interviews using semi-structured questioning and the small-scale distribution of a questionnaire. Her results lend weight to the general assessment that creative writing is 'valuable' in adult education, not only in the direct terms of the participant becoming a better writer and reader, but in increasing self-confidence, providing a release from solitude (especially that of retirement), adding to understanding of and empathy with

others and enhancing creative and (presumably) critical ability generally. An interesting finding is that practical aspects of writing – the learning of skills and techniques and the completion of projects, is important in granting a concrete sense of achievement. "If one aim of adult learning," McAllister concludes, "is to raise students' self-esteem, then creative writing classes clearly have something to offer."

The business of breaking down isolation for individuals both as writers and just as people would seem to be very significant. Schlee (1982) stresses the importance of mutual support and critical feedback in the workshop situation which is otherwise unavailable to the vast majority of writers. Maillard (1985) points to how the actual physical setting can influence the nature of a group and discusses the value of 'speciality' and open groups from his own experience of tutoring in areas of high unemployment. He is interested not only in the isolation of individuals but also of entire communities in the South Wales valleys.

Butler (1985), writing about his experience of 'life writing', also emphasises the value of group work in building mutual trust and confidence and talks about the growth of self-awareness of the group as a whole: "the group's success could serve as a model for the establishment of similar programmes in other senior centres and residential homes." Staples (1981) outlines how she identified some of the problems, requirements and shortcomings of her group and tried out various solutions; she concludes by supporting the argument that the personal and social aspects of humanities work with 'elders' are significant and valuable.

The needs and expectations of the participant are examined by McAllister, Maillard, Butler, Staples and Schlee, the last three also contributing interesting material on the problems and preconceptions of the tutor. Although the subject is too broad for the scope of this article, it is worthwhile mentioning that all of these writers, to a greater or lesser extent, deal with teaching approaches that have worked for them in their different situations: Maillard, for example, touches on the problems faced by anyone working with people with disabilities.

The matter of what tutors actually **do** in their sessions is a huge one, but it is necessary for our purpose to consider one widely-held dictum: that creative writing **is something 'that can only be learned and cannot be taught'**. Bulman (1986) puts it thus:

Can we teach someone to write a good poem? The answer is probably "no", but I can be sure that it is possible to teach a student to write a **better poem than they have written.**

The apparent paradox here originates from wider cultural contradictions: the terms 'good' or 'better' in art are acknowledged as relative things — we generally accept that

criteria of quality are not simply defined, changing with the times and the cultural and political concerns of the reader. Yet the tutor is still expected to be a mechanism for the 'improvement' of the work of say 10-30 people in a class. If there are no absolute criteria for 'good' writing, what can 'better' mean?

Steele (1990) supports Bulman, yet cannot avoid a note of condescension:

Talent cannot be taught. Failure to accept this can have tragic consequences. However... (this) doesn't mean it can't be nourished and educated. Furthermore... just as most people can be taught to pass their driving test, so they can be shown how to write a poem, construct a story or plot a play. Also... however well anyone writes, he or she can be taught to write better. One of the roles of the creative writing teacher is to edit his students – to gently hold the mirror up to their imperfections.

Schlee outlines a central difficulty for her:

At once a problem arises. The fact that the student has not been drawn into a circle which has developed naturally, but has joined a class with a tutor, suggests that a body of knowledge or expertise will be passed on. The implication is that there are rules that can be learned and skills that can be practised. This implied offer is a very tempting one but at best it is based on a doubtful proposition... in fact the real material for their fictions is already in their possession. They also possess, without perhaps being aware of it, the means of expression in the natural patterns of storytelling and the patterns of speech absorbed since childhood.

It is worth pointing out a couple of issues which arise from Schlee's observation. The first has to do with the wider debate within adult and continuing education about the accreditation of prior learning – not a pressing issue here perhaps but certainly an area where a good deal of subtle work will need to be done for use in educational contexts, both formal and informal, where creative writing may itself be accredited or play a part in a wider accredited programme. The second – the acknowledgement of personal experience as an essential contributing factor to a participant's involvement in a creative writing workshop – has a direct bearing on the self-development function of creative writing courses which we will be looking at in greater detail as we progress.

Although her notion of 'natural patterns of storytelling' is questionable, Schlee goes on to make a direct challenge, the validity of which any experienced creative writing tutor will surely recognise:

Some would argue that, at worst, attempts to teach this subject can do positive harm, especially to developing talents. To be told that certain types of plot are popular before students have discovered what it is out of their own experience of life they most wish to write about; that a certain length of story will sell before the student has discovered in what form he is happiest writing; to be advised to make an extensive study of the favoured attitudes of style of a particular magazine before he has found the confidence to speak with his own voice, all might well be harmful. Yet this kind of advice is often given in such classes.

So – if, as so many would seem to agree, the subject cannot in fact be taught, how and what does the student learn? I think it would be useful to rephrase this question in a way which sheds a new light on our apparent paradox: what does the student (or better – participant) **experience** in a class or a workshop? And what is special or valuable in that class or workshop that makes it worthwhile to attend regularly and respond to its challenges? These issues are at the heart of any attempt at evaluation.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Seven writing courses were used for this pilot project: they were called **Characters in Action** (drama), **Inspiration to Write**, **Work in Words** (for people over 50 years of age and part of a larger reminiscence project called 'Life's Work'), **Finding Your Own Voice** (for women only) and **Write that Story**, all of which were held at the University, together with **Writing for Pleasure and Profit** and **Writing for Publication** held at local schools.

I visited the tutor of each course and explained the project before handing out copies of the questionnaire to its members. Spare questionnaires were left with the tutor for new members and absentees. Towards the end of each course I visited each group again to jog elbows and replace lost questionnaires. Each participant was then contacted by mail with SAEs and asked to return their completed questionnaires. In all 87 went out and 45 came back. Tape-recorded interviews were then conducted with 13 of the participants.

The small scale of the project and the nature of the subject (for reasons we shall soon be aware of) mean that statistical analysis is impossible, but in the following presentation of responses I will quote figures to show where respondents' emphases lie. The questionnaire itself was divided into two sections, A and B; participants were asked to complete Section A at the beginning of their course and section B towards the end.

SECTION A

**A1. Had you ever done any creative writing before you attended this course?
Please give brief details.**

26 yes

8 no

Others answered in the affirmative but with added riders such as "years ago", "only in classes", "only for myself", "only professionally" etc.

A2 Have you attended any other creative writing courses, groups or work-shops? Please give brief details.

26 yes with 6 adding some disclaimer that the course they attended previously wasn't really significant or that it took place some time ago.

It is worth noting that a 'yes' answer to A2 should in theory, have guaranteed a 'yes' to A1 — it is hard to imagine that many people could have attended a creative writing workshop without having actually done any writing at all! Yet in eight cases (including both the definite and reserved 'yesses' to A1) this was not the case. The problem here probably lies in the difficulty some respondents clearly had in determining whether or not the work they had done in the past was worthy of the grand term "writing"!

A3. What were your personal goals and ambitions before you attended a creative writing course?

is the first question that asks for some consideration of the writer's own activity and motivation.

7 answered 'none' while others mentioned

12 to get published

7 technical improvement

6 complete some special project (including 4 novels)

5 'to see if I could do it'

3 discipline

with 2 others expressing an interest in publication.

Other factors mentioned were: to get to know the Edinburgh writing scene; 'a vague desire to write'; to get over writer's block, to write about a nervous breakdown; to increase personal confidence; 'curiosity'; 'pleasure'; to write about one's family and to get personal resentments off one's chest.

The stress shown here on getting into print is predictable enough but it's also perhaps the easiest answer, the one which may spring first to mind. It is usually taken for granted that every writer wants to be published but there are other possibilities for writing which are not necessarily precluded by publication. Can we expect participants to give sufficient thought to a written questionnaire, especially without any prior discussion as to deeper possibilities? Some respondents read the question not as before the course but in attending the course. It's probably not that easy to differentiate the two in practice in any case.

- A4. Had you ever shared your writing with anyone else in any way, whether just by showing it to friends, sharing it in a group, or having it printed or performed? Please give details.**

Almost all answers were very brief:

26 friends and family
15 in groups
8 in publications or attempting to publish
6 none
1 competitions

A2 tells us that 26 people had attended groups yet here only 15 admit to having shared their work in groups – an unlikely mismatch. It is clear though that for most participants their creative writing course represents the public arena for their writing.

The perceived benefits of attending a course are indicated in the answers to the next two questions:

- A5. Why did you decide to attend a creative writing course? (If this course isn't your first, please answer with regard to the first course you attended.)**

11 to learn skills and techniques
9 discipline
8 general interest (e.g. retirement or pre-retirement)
5 to 'find out if I could write'
5 to share work with others
5 get encouragement
3 develop creative skills
2 to learn how to get published
2 to try out new forms and styles of writing

There was obviously some overlap here with A3, but the learning of skills and the discipline provided by a course are clearly accentuated, as is the fellowship of working with others.

A6. What made you decide to attend THIS PARTICULAR course?

yielded a broad mix of answers which highlight the practical as well as the creative considerations which bring an individual to any specific group:

- 17 venue and time of class
- 10 title of class
- 8 'best on offer'
- 6 same course or tutor as before
- 4 to learn about how to get published
- 2 recommended
- 2 fact that the group was just for women
- 2 picked up leaflet by chance

Other considerations mentioned were that at the university one expected a good standard and one had friends attending the course. Time and venue are obviously vital factors — for many their class was the only one they were able to attend, whatever it may have been called. The 'best offer' answer I can only interpret as indicating a compromise of both subject and availability of course.

A7. Are you attending any other groups or workshops NOW? If so, which?

Again, the answer will inevitably reflect personal constraints.

- 24 none
- 6 a writers circle (as distinct from a tutored course)
- 5 another writing course
- 4 writing weekends or day schools running during the course
- 5 others mentioned that they were attending courses other than writing.

Although one cannot use these figures to assess any level of commitment by the participants, it is interesting to note that for the great majority their writing class is their only current educational experience and as writers their only regular exposure to other writers.

A8. What hopes or expectations with regards to yourself and/or your writing did you have in deciding to attend this course?

was included to encourage a deeper response to the issues raised by 6 and 7. A broader spectrum of answers resulted.

8 skills and technique

8 to get published

6 stimulation

5 meet other writers

4 discipline

4 to get better

4 to complete a personal project

3 constructive criticism from the group

2 a new interest in life in retirement

2 to 'broaden outlook'

2 enjoyment

1 to hear other people's work

1 to get beyond the limits of one's personal ambition

As to many of the other questions most of the respondents gave more than one answer and the breakdown given above is naturally a simplification, itself overlapping, of answers open to different interpretations. It is necessary also to take note, while giving due credence to those hopes and expectations most commonly given, of the problem of the most immediate and easy answer springing to mind and from there to the paper; answers given in Section B may highlight this while making for a more complete response. The replies to

A9. What fears, if any, did you have?

are possibly more revealing: though 16 answered none,

7 thought others would be better than them

6 were afraid that they had no talent

5 were afraid that the course would be no good, and

3 were nervous about reading aloud

Other responses included the fear that the class would be too 'arty', that one would panic at direct questions or that others would be too seriously concerned with publishing. One feared 'being laughed at', others that 'exposure to real poets would

depress me', 'that after a bereavement I wouldn't be able to function in a group' and that 'after a practical life I would have no rapport with creative writers'.

Despite the 35% of respondents who said that they had no fears, confidence is a common problem. Thankfully amongst our sample, as shown in the answers to the next few questions, the experience is however a generally positive one.

A10. How did you feel after the first class?

29 encouraged

11 discouraged

3 'interested' or mixed feelings

Reasons cited for discouragement included feeling inept, overwhelmed by others' confidence, that the group wasn't what was expected, that it was going to be 'a long haul from technical writing', that the group was too small, that a trial class was needed.

The participants can, it seems, be discouraged by the quality of a group, or at least their expectation of quality; this problem is not of course confined to the subject of creative writing, but it does highlight the common notion that the writing business is highly competitive and you have to be blessed with a strong ego as well as talent, in order to flourish.

If Section A attempted to probe into the writer's expectations both of self and course, B is more about the actual experience. B1 deliberately emphasises the positive, on the presumption that respondents are unlikely to be totally honest about any negative feelings, especially as they may pertain to the tutor. The answers strongly accentuate the importance of the group activity:

SECTION B

B1. What aspects of the course have you found most enjoyable?

23 interaction with other writers

8 group discussion

8 feedback from tutor

5 specific class exercises

2 learning theoretical material

Learning how to get published is now mentioned only once: hearing work read out by the tutor and reading out one's work in class are also cited. It is interesting to note that 'skills and techniques' are not mentioned at all – possibly because this kind of thing is unlikely to spring to mind when thinking about what is 'enjoyable', but it could also be that they are now being referred to by participants as 'theory'.

B2. Generally speaking, did you feel comfortable as part of the class?

36 answers of **yes**: clearly the creative writing class is no longer seen as a particularly intimidating situation. The same number answered **better** or **the same** to

B3. Did you feel more or less comfortable as the course went on? Why?

Only 2 felt worse, one of these having strong criticisms of both the tutor's style and the content of the course; some of the other members in the same class shared something of his problems but ultimately his case must stand as an example of the many unsung cases of the course drop-out.

There is, in fact, little point in giving numbers for the next question as the answer given must relate to what the respondent's original preconceptions actually were:

B4. Have your preconceptions about the course proved true or false? Why?

The term 'preconceptions' clearly does not imply the same as 'hopes and fears' in A8, so the answers to B4 cannot be expected to register changes in these respects. They do, however, reveal some valuable indicators that were not readily forthcoming to more direct questions. These included: more writing in class required; too much discussion in class; more honest criticism expected; a lack of direction in the class; the course wasn't 'practical' enough; the ideas thrown up by the class were stimulating but the quality of the work was poor.

It must be stressed that most respondents chose to answer with a straight 'yes' or 'no' or not to answer at all, but what these other responses actually have in common is the need by some of the respondents for a more conventionally goal-oriented course, with a sequence of rights and wrongs, dos and don'ts, that can be learnt and applied. Any creative writing tutor will know, however, that you cannot please everybody all of the time and that what is too much discussion, homework or structure for one will never be enough for another.

It is now beginning to seem likely that good feedback with regards both to course content and management will emerge for us more in the interview stage of our process.

B5. Has your experience of the course been affected in any way, do you think, by your age, gender, ethnic origin or any special needs you have? Please give details.

In fact, I am not aware that any of the respondents were actually non-white or disabled. Some interesting comments were made, however, with regard to age. One woman puts her insufficient involvement in her class down to her age – it may well be true in her own case, but there is certainly no basis here for generalisation. At the other end of the spectrum, one young woman regrets that she had to tone down risqué material to spare the feelings, as she saw it, of the older class members.

As we shall see in our discussion of the interview stage, there may be more subtle issues to do with gender and age than will be ascertained by a question aimed more or less at detecting straightforward discrimination, whether conscious or not.

B6. Have you found the course to be of value to yourself personally, apart from whatever benefits you may have gained as a writer? How?

The question yielded findings which emphasise those of B1 and support the case of other researchers cited earlier that there are considerable social and personal advantages in attending a creative writing course: 14 respondents mentioned 'socialising' as a prime personal benefit and 6 gave 'self-esteem' and 'confidence' enhanced; others stressed the 'good discussion' sometimes of personal issues, the opportunity to learn about each other's lives and an enhanced sense not only of achievement, but of identity. One, apparently, learned better to tolerate others!

In response to

B7. How has the course helped you as a writer?

11 cited better technical skills and 9, interestingly, felt that they had learned how to pay closer attention to their work and criticise themselves more usefully. Another way of putting this is simply that they had expanded their own critical awareness. No-one had mentioned this as a goal or expectation previously. 8 had revised their own aims or were now trying out previously alien styles or genres, 6 felt they had benefited from the discipline of attending a course, and 3 mentioned the importance of encouragement. Only one said he had been helped towards publication.

A related question was

B8. Has your attitude to publication or performance changed at all as a result of attending this course?

The term 'performance' was largely ignored – it is too broad a term; most people probably don't think of public reading or performance as a real significant option for them.

8 said that they were more confident about attempting to get published and 4 were less so. As seems to be common in these replies though, the answers themselves are more revealing than the head-counting: 2 people said that they had learned the constructive lesson that publishing was not for them, (an outcome which, given the generally strong emphasis on publishing goals in Section A, may have been seen to be somewhat negative, but now appears more positive), while another had come to "appreciate the struggle". One said she needed to learn more about the market and another had overcome her fear of the rejection slip! One was now "unable to write anything at all" but did not say why.

B9. Has the course affected your goals or ambitions as a writer? How?

really allows development of B7 and B8. However, 15 answered **none**. Some had discovered a predilection for drama say, or poetry, that they were not aware of before, and several claimed a wider knowledge now of different kinds of writing. There was less mystique and more hard work to writing.

B10. Do you expect to take more creative writing courses or join a creative writing group or workshop? If you do have specific ones in mind, please give details and reasons.

elicited 21 **yes** answers and 4 **nos** with 18 blanks, a 'maybe' and a stress on a group rather than a course. Clearly most respondents wish to continue their experience of writing with others. What the question does not unearth is how **many** courses or how **many years** in courses or groups people take. Do they tend to stay faithful to a course or a tutor, and if so, why? Or do they tend to pick-and-mix? Comments made were very varied: one respondent felt that it was time to get down to work on his own, while others wanted to try out a more specialised course in a particular genre. Some felt they definitely needed the stimulus of a tutor-led course.

The final question

B11. Looking back, can you think of any more reasons as to why you wanted to come in the first place?

yielded a variety of responses, none of which were particularly startling: 20 said **none** and the others "to do something positive in retirement"; satisfy curiosity; learn new skills; meet kindred spirits and to have fun. One respondent discovered that she always did want to be a writer and another had realised that what she really had been looking for was the means for personal expression and growth which her particular group had provided for her.

So that was the questionnaire, with my own brief and inevitably somewhat subjective precis of its responses – only the first stage of a process but valuable for what it can reveal and for what we can learn about its shortcomings.

We have, of course, learnt nothing about those who didn't complete it; why didn't they? Did they drop out of their courses and, if so, why? Answers to such a query would surely be of benefit to the whole field of continuing education. Furthermore, what about all those writers and would-be writers out there in Edinburgh who are put off from attending a course at all? Tillie Olsen writes movingly about the *Silences* (Olsen 1980) that prohibit writing – what about the personal factors which stop people taking creative courses of whatever kind as adults? How can we learn about those?

And what about the practical constraints in terms of time and resources that conditioned the distribution and return of our own questionnaire? How do these affect our findings? Is what is useful to a university-funded researcher in Edinburgh of any value at all, say, in an English inner-city area with a greater ethnic and cultural diversity? What can we glean of benefit to the creative-writer tutor working in a day centre for stroke victims or people with learning disabilities?

The restraints on our process are in some ways quite marked – it is after all a pilot project and we must be fully aware of its limitations before we take it upon ourselves either to draw conclusions or to generalise: we must be clear about both what works and what is interesting in our process and what is not. As a small-scale project it is hard to assess outcomes in any statistical way; we have shown that it is often difficult to tease out clear and consistent interpretations of answers to questions that have themselves been understood in different ways by participants with different backgrounds, experiences and preconceptions. Reading through the completed questionnaires there grew in me an awareness of the ambiguities inherent in many of the questions and the responses and how they mirror widespread cultural ones. While yielding many fascinating insights, it became clear that there were swathes of concern which the questionnaire left untouched.

As a participant in a creative writing workshop, one needs, in order to be fully involved, to learn an appropriate language of comprehension and criticism: hopefully this language grows as part and parcel of one's experience of the course. Similarly in completing this questionnaire: unless, it seems, one has a developed vision of what creative writing can actually offer the individual in all its guises and applications, it is difficult either to identify what one needs or to make any kind of informed value judgement about what one is getting. The participant will, in all likelihood, be too modest to talk frankly about ambitions to publish and will almost certainly be loath to criticise the tutor in writing.

And the questionnaire technique lends itself, as we have seen, to the most readily available answers, rather than to deeply considered responses to often complex and ambiguous issues and motivations – in many cases it was obviously easier for the participant just to leave a blank. As we have pointed out, there are cultural presumptions which appear to underlie even the most basic questions. What is success anyway? Is it walking out of a workshop having managed to finally find the right words with which to share something of one's own emotional experience? Or is it having your name in gold on the spine of a

paperback in Smith's? There is no one answer. And what, then, is failure? Certainly a real enough sensation in the worlds of publishing or theatre, but does it have any place, or even any meaning, in the continuing education creative writing course?

Quite by chance one of my respondents provided a further insight into some of these difficulties. 'Anna' said she had lost her questionnaire so I gave her a new one – this after she had completed Section A. She filled in her second questionnaire and then her first one showed up. The differences between the answers she gave to certain questions are quite marked:

- (1) When I attended the first course I had just completed my MA, was unemployed, 56 years old and had always wanted to write. Now was the time.
 - (2) I thought I could become famous. Now I do not want that. I would be unable to cope with fame. I want to do what I have to do so that God will not accuse me of wasted talents.
- these with regard to A5.

To A9, **What fears did you have?** she wrote:

- (1) I've had writer's block for a very long time. I was afraid that I would never write again.
- (2) That I might spoil a writer by harsh criticism as I am jealous.

Such is the variation here (though the questionnaire is clearly provoking reflection in Anna) that the reliability of all individual responses is thrown into doubt. There are clearly multiple possibilities of response to each question and they may, it appears, vary widely (or wildly!) over time, be it from week or even one hour to the next.

THE INTERVIEW

The interviews were semi-structured and individual; the interviewees were asked for their comments on the questionnaire itself and given the opportunity to expand on their answers. It is necessary at this stage to indicate the main points made by each of them.

'Maria' and 'Theresa' had both attended the **Finding Your Own Voice** group for women of all ages held on a weekday morning at Edinburgh University. Neither had followed the instructions with regard to the answering of sections A and B – Maria had answered A1 and left it, and Theresa had completed the whole thing to hand in, insisting that her answers would nevertheless be accurate.

Their course had been described in the university brochure for Open Studies as follows:

A series of women's writing workshops aimed at beginners or those seeking a fresh start. Exercises, writing, readings, commentary, discussion. Emphasis on writing for own satisfaction rather than saleability.

Maria had originally responded more to the emphasis she detected on self-discovery than the fact that the course was for women; Theresa thought the same applied to her though both agreed that it was easier to talk about personal issues in the company of other women – it generated 'a good spirit' – "we speak up more when we're on our own". It was good to be able "to write from the heart". They did not consider themselves a feminist group as such, and hardly talked about feminism as an issue. Having a wide range in the group was an enjoyable and positive aspect for both women.

Neither had publication been a major topic, though if a really good piece was produced by a member she would be encouraged to try and get it published and possible outlets would be recommended. Theresa, who had not considered publishing before, said she was now more open to the idea, though not from the point-of-view of making money. 'Alice', also from the same course, said it had 'felt good' not to worry about publication. Maria, a former journalist who had had ideas about making money from creative writing, had dropped that ambition and felt better about her own writing as a result.

Both felt that, over the course, the writing of all participants had grown deeper, richer and more meaningful, and that this was the major criterion of the class's success. Maria and Theresa had grown less inhibited themselves after sharing work with others and reading it out. Theresa stressed that she was more able to criticise herself and was thus able to respond to other's comments and criticisms without being 'shattered' by them; she felt she was slowly but surely finding her own voice. One felt she would need the continuing discipline of a course to keep writing, the other didn't **need** a course but would carry on because she found it useful and enjoyable, providing a focus and an antidote to the loneliness of the writer.

With regard to the questionnaire itself, Theresa thought that the questions themselves deserved a good response and in fact her written answers were thorough. Maria was very dissatisfied with the answers she had given to a few of the questions: "I don't know why I put that" she said, "I wouldn't put it the same way now."

'Anthea', now in her 60s, had not wanted to attend the women's group as she did not consider herself a feminist and presumed that it would have a feminist content. She had opted instead for **Work in Words**, a course confined to people over 50, and found that she was very comfortable with that age range, however broad. She considered the 1960s to be a watershed decade – people growing up since then saw things in a radically different way. Anthea was also encouraged by the stress on self-expression, rather than publication. The **involvement** of working in a supportive group situation is of paramount importance – the **doing** is the thing, especially for older people, rather than the passivity of lectures.

'Jane' had shared Anthea's suspicions about the women's group, but joined anyway in the knowledge that one has three sessions in which to try it out (an obvious point that no-one else picked up on though there is no guarantee, of course, that there would still be space available on alternative courses if one decided to leave). Unlike Anthea, Jane wanted to be in a group of mixed ages and reacted against the '50+ label'. Her positive feelings about the course echoed those of Maria and Theresa adding that an important discovery for her had been the authenticity and value of her own life experiences for writing – she felt that she was now working to find a language appropriate for her.

She felt that the course description was accurate and she got what she expected. This was not the case for 'Margaret' who had attended the second session of **Writing for Pleasure and Profit** only to find that in the previous week the group had decided to concentrate on the novel. As a writer of comic verses this was not, she felt, much good to her and this, coupled with ill-health and winter travel problems, led to her leaving the course after a few weeks.

Although Margaret had said that her poetry was not about personal expression, in my opinion she contradicted herself on a deeper level, claiming that it had 'therapeutic value': she had written poems when her house burned down, when she first nursed a dying patient, when her father died, and when she felt angry at someone. She reiterated a common feeling amongst people writing in popular verse forms that what she was doing was not 'real' poetry; (in my experience such a fear is another symptom of the mystique which has grown up around experimentation in all the arts and which can be challenged in the workshop situation; but this is a large subject, worthy of further attention elsewhere).

'Jeff' and 'Ruth' had both had problems, to different degrees, with personal dynamics in their class. The situation described by them illustrates the need for the tutor to possess the qualities of a good chairperson or referee; but also the participants themselves, as a basis to learning how to become good critics, need to know how to be good at acting as

part of an organic whole – how to be a workshop. Most often this is left entirely to chance.

'Jack', though a less than fully committed writer, was a member of a large class with a focus on getting work into print. He enjoyed the good interaction between the tutor and the class members and the members themselves. He was very aware of the major differences between the younger and the older participants – "they're not on the same wavelength", but found exposure to the thoughts and opinions of the young stimulating. In fact, several interviewees remarked that a writing workshop provided a unique opportunity to share thoughts and feelings with others, often of different sex, ages and walks of life, in a deeper way.

'Jim' thought that the overlapping concerns of the questions interesting as he was led to consider and reconsider matters from different angles. Writing had always played an important part in Jim's life but only when he suffered a severe breakdown had he begun to use it as therapeutic self-expression ('abreaction' as he called it) on the advice of a psychiatrist. He reckoned that many people who attended creative writing courses use writing as an exploration and expression of personal emotion, whether they realise it or not, and although he only ever expected publication success in a small way, the creative work itself was 'immensely valuable', including any kind of constructive seminar with others.

'Alice' has also suffered a severe emotional shock and was nervous about the subject coming up in her group; in fact she did write something about her experience and felt herself allowed by the group to give it voice.

'Bob' talked about the value of "realising one's own talent". Having recently retired, Bob felt it was too easy an option to spend all his time gardening – he needed a challenge, preferably in some kind of social situation. Like others he had since discovered the worth of his own experiences and was exploring different ways of putting these on paper, one of his major lessons being to do with the importance of revision.

As regards the questionnaire, Bob was not sure what was required by some of the questions and found them rather repetitive. He said he had a clearer idea about what to put after he had read it through two or three times.

Bob's chief fear of attending the course was that of intimidation by others who may have already had work published. He thought it highly likely that there were a good many folk out there who had never made the giant step of signing up for a course for the same reason.

'Susan' was surprised that the course she signed up for turned out to be as demanding as it was, thinking that it was aimed primarily at beginners (the blurb actually reads "Even if you are a complete beginner..."). Many of the other participants had been writing for some time and were very serious about their class work. Because of the applied nature of the course and its clear focus (**Write that Story**) and the skill and determination of its

tutor, it was, she said, very strong on developing skills and providing discipline but not much of a social occasion. The mental stimulation of the course was itself beneficial and her confidence in her writing increased, though she was intimidated by the "quickness and cleverness" of the younger members of the group. Having said that though, she felt that the writing produced by the older ones was more interesting – they had more life experience to write from.

When Susan began to write about the use of fictional plots and characters in providing useful forms of 'disguise' for personal expression, I considered how our interview had led us to this point; its semi-constructed nature had allowed many unforeseen insights to emerge, all worthy of consideration in the wider remit of the project.

Finally 'Anthony' gave a long considered interview that stood in marked contrast to the brevity of his questionnaire answers. We covered a wide range of issues in some depth, including the significance of a participant's knowing or not knowing the tutor personally, what happens when the majority of the group are interested in one genre or teaching approach and the difficulty faced by educational institutions in assessing or responding to public demand. More so than any other, the interview pointed up the plain fact that because some people fill in a questionnaire in a cursory way, it does not mean that they are in any way indifferent to their course or unaware of related issues.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

The business of evaluation in Creative Writing is a tricky one; the courses we have looked at are very varied – one was just for women; another for people over 50; some concentrated on specific genres, play writing or the short story; others on self-expression or commercial gain. We have had to ask the question what is success anyway? Is there a definition that can be applied, within the field of adult and continuing education across the board? What are we evaluating – the participant's success at publication, the tutor's performance or the dynamics of the group? Can we evaluate a reminiscence workshop in the same terms as a course called 'Writing to Publish'? Is every participant's experience so individual (because writing's an essentially individualistic activity) that it's pointless to attempt to make any value judgement at all about a group?

I have mentioned several factors about the questionnaire that have been revealed by our process; despite the difficulties of ambiguity, brevity, interpretation etc. of any one question, it still served to illustrate some general trends and emphases and to act as a framework for constructive interviewing. The interview itself opened up the possibility of a more complete response from the participant – a response which may deal with personal as well as educational and creative issues and permits a more subtle exploration of them. We have now seen how any creative writing course will inevitably embody the assumptions that the tutor and the participants bring with them as to what writing actually is; these assumptions may well change as the course continues – new ideas may emerge which were never considered before, new situations will arise. We have seen how being in a creative writing course may bring many benefits for people – social, emotional and creative. This is not the place to engage in a detailed discussion of what the 'therapeutic' benefits of creative writing are or can be: suffice it to say that our research supports the growing view that creative writing, and participation in a constructive workshop, can aid self-expression and self-development with diverse benefits. (While we are on the subject, it should also be stressed that despite the rapid growth of interest by artists, providers and the public at large in the role of the arts in therapeutic contexts, there exists, at present, no training facility or forum for writers who wish to work in this way – one can train in the UK as an art, a drama or a music therapist, but not yet as a writing therapist.)

I would now like to formulate two propositions based directly on my findings as they pertain to the creative writing workshop:

Firstly, the extent that a writing workshop works **as a workshop**, to the fullest advantage and with the maximum participation of its members, is the sole criterion for its success. This seems to me to be a truism that allows for the diversity or homogeneity of its participants in terms of their ages, gender, backgrounds, personal traits and writerly ambitions. Secondly, and probably more boldly, members' contributions to a workshop will develop as their 'critical' ability develops – as they grow, through work and discussion, as writers and become more aware of, and involved in, the issues surrounding, and the possibilities for, their writing. In other words, the better the group, the better its writers will be and vice

versa. I am making a case based on the findings of this pilot project, for an organic relationship between writer and workshop and acknowledging the special possibilities the functioning workshop offers and the challenge it inevitably makes to some standard literary assumptions to do with value and individualism.

According to these conclusions, the term 'writer' is available, as I believe it should be, to anyone who writes, and the notions of the 'real' and the 'would-be' or 'amateur' writer are recognised as part of a mystique which excludes the overwhelming majority, and more importantly, impedes access to their own creative abilities. Most published writers after all cannot make a living from their work and there is little or no correlation between literary value and commercial success. Getting better as a writer here involves getting better at participating in the discourse about writing, and finding and developing one's 'own voice' is bound up with a continuing process of constructively evaluating what is going on in the group and taking it forward. This is not so much a radical approach, but an acknowledgement of the unique value of the creative writing workshop as it exists and the true reason for its enduring popularity in adult education. What we need to do, perhaps, as providers and as tutors, is to apprehend this fact and act as if we were conscious of it.

'Writing can only be learned – it cannot be taught'; the learning lies in the experience of the group. How can we move to provide a better experience for more participants? This project has shown us the shortcomings of the questionnaire on its own and highlighted the strengths of interviewing. A more thorough process of feedback should, as an inevitable corollary of our conclusions about the successful workshop, be built into the courses: questionnaires might enable useful samples to be identified for interviewing – trials need to be done on the efficacy of individual and group interviews, group discussion and the role of the tutor in such processes.

With regard to the presentation of and enrolment into courses it is, it seems, worth considering more versatile structures within the institutions which offer them. Personal constraints, the availability of courses, knowledge about tutors, interpretation of course descriptions, all contribute to a hit-or-miss experience for many. A system whereby course 'sampling' or taster sessions were built in, with open workshops leading to more specialised ones and day-schools and short courses being available to meet specific requirements would all be positive steps, as would employing staff on more of a residency basis with tutors having the time to see individuals for 'surgeries' as well as run courses.

A mechanism within an institution whereby creative writing (and possibly other humanities) tutors could work as more of a team would necessarily recognise the need for skill-sharing and development.

It may well be true that only in the context of a wider recognition of Creative Writing as a discipline in its own right and one whose definition takes account of the wide-ranging concerns of its participants, can any meaningful system of evaluation be developed and implemented.

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